Nonprofit Boards: How to Find a Rewarding Board Position

Becoming a member of a nonprofit organization's board can be a meaningful way to explore how an individual's experience and expertise can be applied in the nonprofit sector at the governance level, and ultimately, how one's experience and expertise can help advance a nonprofit organization's social impact. It also can be a rewarding, high impact way that for-profit executives can do community service while learning new skills that can enhance their own careers.

"When you join a board, what you are really saying is that you agree to put your personal interests and ambitions in the background," said Linda Crompton, president and chief executive officer (CEO) of BoardSource, a Washington, DC-based organization dedicated to building strong nonprofit boards and encouraging board service. "You are there to best serve the best interests of that organization."

With serving the best interests of an organization in mind, it's important to choose social causes you are most passionate about. "I believe the single most important element in being a successful board member and helping to make a board much more effective is your own interest and passion in the work of that group," Crompton said. "On a board, and a nonprofit board in particular, you are meant to be an ambassador. If you, as an ambassador, don't feel passionate about the work of this organization, who will?"

To explore your passion for a particular cause, it can help to walk through a series of questions. Jeri Eckhart-Queenan, a partner with the Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit advisor to nonprofits and philanthropy, offers the following questions as guides:

- Is the work of the organization interesting to me?
- Could I imagine making the organization one of my leading philanthropies, in terms of the time, energy, and other personal resources I'm willing to devote to it?
- How willing would I be to introduce others to the work of the organization?

It also can help to volunteer with an organization. Many organizations have fundraising events staffed by volunteer committees, such as "Friends of the Board." Helping out at one of these events or joining an event committee can provide opportunities to learn more about the organization, its mission, and its board, and in turn, help you better explore your passion for its work.

Determining which opportunities are best

After you've determined those causes you're truly passionate about, you can begin to evaluate specific opportunities. Four fundamental questions can help you determine whether a particular position will be the right fit.

1. Are my goals the same as those of this organization and its board?
2. Can I contribute skills, experience, or expertise that will increase the impact of the organization and help it advance its mission?
3. Am I prepared to commit the time required to fulfill my legal and fiduciary responsibilities as a board member?
4. Am I required to give/raise money for this board and can/will I do that?

1. Are my goals the same as those of this organization and its board?

Finding out who else is on the board can offer a sense of whether or not you are likely to fit into that group. Discover what interests they represent, their goals as individual members and as a group, and how they work together. Also determine what kind of relationship the board has with the executive director (ED). Does the ED consider the board an asset to the organization? Do the ED and the board chair work together to find ways to engage the skills of each board member? If your goal in joining a board is to learn and use your skills to have a positive impact on the organization and its mission, Crompton pointed out, then it would be extremely frustrating to find yourself on a body that was effectively a rubber stamp for management. "You've got to really match the way this board functions to your values system," Crompton said. "You have to make sure there's a fit."

Andrew Hahn, professor and director of the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management in Waltham, MA, said that when he looks at a new board opportunity, he looks for signs that there is a strong, committed leader at the helm who engages the board in decision-making at the organization. "Good leaders make board members feel good about what they're doing," Hahn said. "I imagine board involvement is not going to be much fun or successful if the leaders aren't strong." In fact, Hahn said he resigned from one board that did not meet his expectations. "They had only one meeting a year where they'd get everyone together to eat lobster," he said. "They were just using board members' names for their letterhead. There wasn't a meaningful engagement."

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2. Can I contribute skills, experience, or expertise that will increase the impact of the organization and help it advance its mission?

Eckhart-Queenan said people considering joining a board should evaluate their ability to have impact and to help advance the mission of the organization. "People who love board service are those who become meaningfully engaged. In addition to fulfilling their fiduciary obligations as board members, they bring a needed professional skill, relevant experience, or subject matter knowledge to the board room," she said. Evaluate barriers that might get in the way of making such a contribution and whether they can be overcome. "For example, if you are being recruited by a nonprofit that the board wants to scale because you have built several businesses, make sure that the CEO has the capabilities to grow the organization or is coachable. If the organization wants to mount a public relations (PR) campaign and you are the PR executive they are bringing on the board to help, make sure that there is a staff that can execute your ideas or be prepared to row a laboring oar," Eckhart-Queenan added.

Veronica Biggins, a partner with the executive search firm Hodge Partners in Atlanta, GA, said clues to how effective a nonprofit board is can be found by reviewing its bylaws, its meeting schedule, its budget, its use of external auditors, and the minutes of prior board meetings (although some minutes may be confidential). She also recommends asking about the rotation schedule for seats on the board and committee chair assignments. "You don't want to see people in lifetime jobs," she said. Other information that could be instructive is whether the current board members enjoy serving on the board and whether there is a waiting list of people hoping to join.

The other side to making sure the board's goals fit with yours is to determine whether your skills meet the board's needs. Many boards have informal (or formal) limits on the number of members within specific professional specialties, i.e., one human resources expert slot, one academic slot, one legal expert slot, etc. But even if you are a lawyer and the board you are interested in already has several lawyers, Crompton said you should think about what unique skills you may bring to the table that can boost the organization's social impact.

"It's a question of analyzing the skill sets they have and then the board itself being very clear about what it is about you that they would find interesting—or you identifying that yourself: the piece you would add is X," Crompton said. "What's the unique skill set I would bring that could serve this board?"

Crompton said directors who are currently most in demand in the nonprofit sector are those who can bring financial acumen to the table, regardless of their professional specialty. "One of the primary

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responsibilities of a nonprofit board member is financial oversight," Crompton said. "That's extremely difficult to do if you don't know the difference between an income statement and a balance sheet."

3. Am I prepared to commit the time required to fulfill my oversight responsibilities and prepared to take on the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of being a board member?

People familiar with nonprofit board service said that those who are new to the sector often underestimate the amount of time required to be an effective board member. In fact, the time commitment for many nonprofit boards can be substantial. Nonprofit boards have many legal and fiduciary responsibilities, established by law. It is vital that board members become informed about those responsibilities and the role that they will play as an individual and a group to fulfill them.

According to Crompton, quarterly meetings are the norm, with each meeting lasting up to three-quarters of a day and requiring a few hours of preparation time in advance. In addition, many board members go through a multi-day orientation program at the beginning of their tenure and are required to participate on one or more subcommittees. "For a mid-sized, average board, it's not unrealistic that you could expect people to be committing 75 to 100 hours per year," Crompton said.

"Not that long ago, the whole idea of board service was the opportunity to mix with some of your peers," Crompton said. "It was a collegial kind of thing; it was fun to do. But the requirements weren't terribly onerous. What we've seen…is a steady ramping up of requirements and responsibilities of sitting on a board. So, it's not to be entered into lightly."

In addition to asking how much time your service on a particular board will take, Eckhart-Queenan said you might ask questions about how that time will be spent. For example, are the board meetings strategic? Do meetings focus on issues that matter the most? Is the chair of the board a committed and skilled leader? Are board members well informed about their roles and responsibilities? "High-performing boards have high-performing chairs that manage the agenda and group dynamics in a way that enables board members to contribute their full intellectual capital to the organization. If the board in question is not performing at this level, be prepared to be patient, or step up to leadership yourself," Eckhart-Queenan said.

Hahn said he spends as much as 20 percent of his time doing work for the various nonprofit and for-profit boards and commissions on which he serves, but he said he feels that his efforts make a difference within the organizations and to society as a whole. "I take it [board service] seriously," Hahn said. "I try to put in a huge amount of time. You really have to believe passionately in the organization's mission." Agreed

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Biggins, "It is hard work. It ebbs and flows, but it's hours and hours. You have to really get involved. You've got to be at the meetings. They really need you there."

4. Am I required to give/raise money for this board and can/will I do that?

Not all nonprofits require board members to raise money: some rely on government funding or generate earned income streams. However, many nonprofits rely on donations from others, and those nonprofit boards ask members to either donate or raise a specific amount of money for the organization. The amounts can vary widely throughout the sector and sometimes even within the same board. Biggins said nonprofit boards typically require some combination of these three things from board members: time, talent, and treasure. If a board member has particular skills and/or is willing to commit substantial time to the organization, s/he may not be asked to participate as much in fundraising as other members. However, Biggins said that in tough economic times, all board members may be asked to step up their level of giving.

Hahn said that as an academic, he is usually expected to provide more expertise than cash. However, he noted that he is so invested in the success of the organizations on whose boards he serves that he oftentimes gets swept up by the generosity of other board members and makes a financial commitment, as well. "Board giving can motivate even the poorest members of the board to give," he said.

Crompton said the key is to know what the financial expectations are up front and to decide whether you are able to meet those expectations. "If you're not prepared to get involved in fundraising and the expectation is that you're going to raise money, that's going to be frustrating all around," she said. In short, do you have the resources and is the organization's mission important enough to you that you are willing to commit not only some of your own financial resources, but to encourage other people you know to commit theirs, too?

Conclusion

For nonprofit executives, serving on a nonprofit board can enhance career development by providing a different perspective on what it takes—at the governance level—to deliver impact, raise resources, and ensure accountability. For executives moving into the nonprofit sector for the first time, finding the right nonprofit board role can be very rewarding. Dedicated, effective for-profit executives can leverage their experience and professional expertise to boost the social impact of the organization. At the same time, the executives can gain new skills and knowledge about nonprofits that could help them consider careers in the sector. As Crompton summarized, "It's a wonderful way to learn at the same time as giving

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something back. Most of the time, you're forced into one or the other of those roles. It's not very often in life that you get that opportunity to do both."

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